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THE ROUND TABLE

THOUGHTS OF A REACTIONARY ON GRAMMAR

I hate grammar. Let that fact be strictly understood at the beginning of this discussion. I think it one of the driest, most dismal, most boring subjects ever admitted into the high-school curriculum. To study it is torture; to teach it is soul-destroying. Nevertheless, I have taught it, I do teach it, and, in spite of all the attacks leveled against it by the modern school of "pat-'em-on-the-back-and-feed-'em-stick-candy" educators, I shall continue to teach it.

The occasion for this outburst is an article that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* several months ago, written by Mr. Meredith Nicholson. In this article Mr. Nicholson attacked the teaching of formal grammar in our schools as a means of obtaining correctness in English composition. It was an exceedingly well-written article; at first reading it seemed absolutely convincing. I own I was shaken in some of the deepest convictions of my soul by Mr. Nicholson's command of language. But it is much easier to kill a genuine reactionary than to change one of his ideas by so much as a syllable. After the first shock had passed, then, I sat down and went at the article in a sound and scientific manner. At the cost of more genuine thinking than I have done at any time since I finished my logic course in college, I extracted from this article the syllogism which lies at its base—or rather, which is its base. The syllogism is:

I [Mr. Meredith Nicholson] am a good writer.

I never studied grammar.

Therefore grammar should not be studied in our schools as a means of teaching correct writing.

Put in that form the argument looks rather absurd. As a matter of fact, the article was by no means absurd; up to a certain point it was highly sensible. There is no disputing the fact that Mr. Nicholson is a fairly good writer. Undoubtedly, as he says, he never studied grammar. Therefore, *for him*, grammar was not a prerequisite of correct writing. Indeed, I will go Mr. Nicholson one better. I never studied grammar until long after my habits of writing had been fixed for life. I am a fairly correct writer. For me, then, grammar was not a pre-

requisite of good writing. I will make a still more extreme statement. I firmly believe that no writer whose English is worth reading for its own sake ever learned one fact about writing from the study of English grammar. But all this has no bearing whatsoever on the question of teaching grammar in our public high schools. Because Shakespeare and Mr. Nicholson and I write good English without studying grammar, it does not follow that John Smith and Joe Kopek and Mary Pizzicato can go and do likewise. The fundamental fallacy in that conclusion, and in Mr. Nicholson's argument, lies in the fact that Shakespeare and Mr. Nicholson and I are exceptional people, from whose examples no generalization can be drawn that will fit the ordinary high-school pupil. And our public schools are planned almost entirely for the ordinary pupil. Mr. Nicholson and Shakespeare and I possess literary sense. We have an instinctive feeling for good English. We were brought up in homes where good English was spoken; we are constant readers of good literature. We learn to write by imitation.

But the ordinary high-school pupil has no literary sense. He habitually hears only the worst, the vilest, the most vulgar spoken English. He reads good literature in small quantities only, and then under compulsion. He cannot learn to write by the imitation method. How then can we teach him to use, not beautiful English, but "decent" English? I repeat, only by long and severe drill in the rules of correct English—in English grammar.

The pupil who enters high school is in the habit of writing, "He don't do it." In his sentences, verb and subject agree about as well as Mayor Hylan and the *New York Tribune*. He says, "Who did you go to see?" and "I will be sick if I eat that." How are we to overcome this appalling illiteracy? Only, as far as I can see, by long, emphatic, and persistent drill in the fundamental principles involved. Only by forcing him constantly to analyze his own work, and thus to pick out and cast out his own errors. If, at the end of my first year's work, I have trained my class to write a dozen simple sentences without some horrible breach of language proprieties, I pat myself on the back, and indorse my check with a clean conscience.

In the second year, grammar is still needed, but grammar of a rather different sort. Here, our effort is to teach the pupil to combine his correct simple sentences into equally correct complex sentences. Our first step in this direction is to destroy two dogmas held as cardinal points of faith by every second-year student. The chief article of his literary belief is that "and" is the only connective in the English language.

He uses this word as a sort of freight-car coupler, to hitch together in one so-called sentence a vast miscellany of totally unrelated ideas. If he has a second article, it is that "while" is a co-ordinating conjunction. He has no idea of relative clauses; he has a holy horror of adverbial clauses. He holds a truly American belief in the right of all ideas to grammatical equality in expression. How is he to become habituated to the use of relative pronouns and conjunctive adverbs? Only by long, emphatic, and persistent drill in clause analysis.

Mr. Nicholson lays great stress on the usefulness of models. So do I. The difference between us lies in the way we would present them. Mr. Nicholson says, "Let the student read the model." I say "Make the student learn the model." Ask any teacher, any person who knows the literary impenetrability of the adolescent mind, which will make the stronger impression on the pupil—the sentence that he reads once, rapidly, as a link in the thought chain of a paragraph, or the sentence that is isolated, written on the blackboard, copied down, pulled apart, and recited on. Educational psychologists tell us that the vividness of an idea in one's mind is increased by the number of sensation channels through which it is received. Against the single visual sensation employed by Mr. Nicholson's method, the grammar method makes use of visual, motor, and auditory sensations. Thus we enlist for the cause of grammar the strong aid of scientific pedagogy.

The practicality of class drill in grammar was impressed upon me by one experience in my last year's teaching. I had a third-year class that was chronically addicted to the "and" habit. For six months I raged and stormed against the fault. I wrote their awful examples on the blackboard; I explained with Job-like patience how the thing should be done; I employed my most cutting sarcasms against the unfortunate addicts: but it was all in vain. Finally, I hit on a rather simple and, for me, labor-saving expedient. At the beginning of every class period, when compositions were to be handed in, I compelled each member of the class to read through his own work, sentence by sentence, to underline once every verb in a subordinate clause and twice every verb in the main clause, and to re-write all sentences containing more than one main verb, unless he could give a definite reasoning for using a compound sentence. It was a brutal, soulless, mechanical method—but it worked. That same class today writes sentences, not, indeed, beautiful, but respectable and workman-like.

Mr. Nicholson's method is much the better one. It was the method of Franklin and Stevenson. It is the method of those rare pupils who

write artistic English. I have met such pupils; I had the pleasure of teaching one last year. She had no more idea of grammar than a cat has of the nebular hypothesis; but she wrote essays and descriptions that were delightful in their ease and maturity of style. I learned, by inquiry at the public library, that she was a constant reader of good novels. For her, Mr. Nicholson's method worked. But she was one in a high school of eighty-odd. For her, and for the occasional literary artist, there is the method of imitation; but for the other eighty, the only method that will produce decent English is that of grammar on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, followed by a thorough grammar review on Friday.

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THE PLAY PRODUCER'S NOTEBOOK

NOTES ON PRODUCTION OF "THE COMEDY OF ERRORS"

The play may be produced in three acts—a better division than the regular five. Thus, Act I consists of two scenes. The first, the Hall in the Duke's palace, shows only two walls, one sloping from one corner front toward the opposite rear; and a short sloping wall from there down to the other front stage corner. This setting allows part of the other scenery to be placed before the play begins. At the end of scene 1, the walls are quickly removed, a few pieces of scenery put into place, and the second scene proceeds after the shortest possible interval.

The Hall should be a simple interior. Any interior suggestive of Greek architecture may be used. The rear frames of flats may be painted black, the canvas panels tan, then paper Greek shields may be hung in the upper squares, Greek armor placed about stage. Upon a platform in the long wall place a large chair for the Duke, over which throw furs, sheepskin, etc. The stone bench (wood of course, but painted gray and sanded) is used later in the other acts, only for scene 1 it is covered by a sheepskin, a fur, or drapery of some brilliant color. A few soldiers attendant upon the duke will dress this scene very well.

When this scenery is quickly removed the stage is set for the remainder of the play, during which no change is made.

Across the rear a blue back-drop will serve as a cyclorama. Some four feet before it place a wall and behind the wall several profiles of trees. Set wings of trees which match the tree profiles showing above the wall.